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ABSTRACT

The usefulness of achievement goal theory in explaining motivation in writing classrooms was studied with 14 students interviewed in fifth, sixth, and tenth grades. In the tenth-grade interview, students were asked about their writing experiences and processes. Interview statements were analyzed by three judges regarding mastery and performance goals for writing and responses that revealed students' motivation and volition to write. Achievement goal theory predicted that performance goals would be related to self-reports of low motivation to write and that this would be particularly evident in lower achieving (and presumably less self-confident) writers. Data suggest that although goal orientation does help explain writing motivation, it is the complex interactive pattern of goals students hold and behaviors they enact that determines achievement outcomes. Findings also suggest that it would be important to identify distinctive types of performance goals in writing, perhaps as related to student conceptions of audience. (Contains 8 references.) (SLD)

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Motivation in the Writing Classroom: Contributions of Goal Theory

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Theoretical Framework and Objectives

Within the last several decades, the major focus of motivational research has moved from drives and reinforcements to cognitions and contexts for achievement. More particularly, motivational researchers have turned to an examination of students' goals for achievement, of the perceptions that inform goal choices, and of the self-regulatory strategies that expedite goal accomplishment. A central dimension of goal theory is the distinction between performance or ego goals (performing for others in order to impress them, sometimes in a competitive sense) and mastery or task goals (focusing on self-improvement regardless of the performance of others). A large body of research indicates that mastery goals are clearly preferable to performance goals in encouraging continued striving (e.g. Dweck, 1986; Nicholls, 1992). Performance goals appear to be particularly debilitating to individuals who lack confidence in their skill or ability (Ames, 1992; Maehr, 1989).

Ames's (1992) research review describes the beliefs and behaviors associated with mastery versus performance goal orientations. Holding mastery goals is associated with the belief that effort brings success; students who hold such goals are interested in developing new skills and in achieving a sense of competence and mastery based on their own standards. Mastery goals are also associated with increased time spent on learning, greater persistence (especially after failure) and a greater likelihood of using effective strategies for learning, problem solving, and self-regulation. In contrast, holding performance goals is associated with a focus on the response of others to one's performance. Students who are oriented toward performance goals are more likely to avoid challenging tasks and to be debilitated by failure. They are likely to avoid expending effort (especially if they have a low self-concept of ability) because they believe that trying and failing confirms their low ability, while not trying is a ready and ego-saving explanation for failure. Performance oriented students are especially likely to prize success following low effort, as this most clearly indicates high ability. Thus, students who are oriented toward a mastery goal are more likely than those who are performance oriented to "have a motivational pattern likely to promote long-term and high-quality involvement in learning" (Ames, 1992).

The superiority of mastery goals as motivators for student effort is problematical for teachers and researchers who wish to understand and encourage motivation in writing, since writers (especially novices) may find it difficult to maintain a mastery-orientation when the very act of writing for an audience requires attention to the eventual reception of their text. Does this necessary attention to audience encourage a performance goal orientation to writing? Writing research has not addressed this question directly, but does offer suggestive descriptions of writers whose excessive concern about evaluative audiences distract them as they try to create well-crafted texts (Cleary, 1991; Graves, 1985). This paper will report our investigation into the usefulness of achievement goal theory to explain motivation in writing classrooms.

Methods and Techniques/ Data Source

Fourteen students (7 boys and 7 girls, 4 black and 10 white), who had been individually interviewed in fifth, sixth, and again in tenth grade served as the sample for this study. Data were drawn from interview transcripts, and included students' evaluative comments on their texts which they had ranked from best to worst. In the tenth grade interview students were also asked questions about their writing experiences and processes. Interview data were analyzed by three judges for statements regarding mastery and performance goals for writing (as defined above) and for responses to questions that revealed students' motivation and volition to write (as seen in student statements about their affective responses to writing and the amount of writing they did). Each judge analyzed the transcripts independently, and the few differences between judges were resolved through discussion.

Results

Achievement goal theory would predict that performance goals would be related to self-reports of low motivation to write, and that this relationship would be especially evident in our lower achieving (and presumably less self-confident) writers. Our analysis suggests that the situation is more complex. After a brief description of some of our more motivated and less motivated students, we will outline additional aspects that appear to interact with goals and to affect motivation.

Motivated Writers

Among the students who appeared highly motivated, several disparate patterns emerged. Ward and George were two students who had high scores on standardized achievement and writing essay tests and who clearly expressed both mastery and performance goal orientations. These very confident writers paradoxically also suffered from self-criticism (seen in Ward's description of one of his texts as sounding "like an idiot wrote it") and concerns about the impressions they created for their audience (seen in George's declaring the most important thing about writing to be "what the person gets out of it -- about you"). Both students had clear and high personally constructed standards for their performance and mastery goals, were able to clearly articulate several writing strategies, and were motivated to write both in and out of school. However, their self-consciousness sometimes led them to subvert their writing achievement by failing to finish, even discarding texts on which they worked. Both these students noted with pride high grades on papers to which they had given little effort. In contrast, despite similarly high standards, two high achieving female students displayed none of their male classmates' angst about writing. Both girls had clear mastery goals but also mentioned their teachers' expectations, and both cheerfully expressed their enjoyment of writing and described well developed writing strategies.

The two low achieving students who were highly motivated were both strongly oriented toward performance standards, but these performance standards were very different in nature. Teara, who planned a career as a

model and seemed pleased with all her writing, saw writing as an opportunity for positive exhibition. Her personal performance criteria focused on the appearance of her papers, and she was self-assured about sharing her self-focused texts ("I just like to describe myself, it's what I like to do."). In contrast, Robbie's performance goals were those set by his teacher in the form of specific objectives (correct verb tense, pronoun use, and so forth) that he would need to master in order to pass the writing portion of the state Basic Skills Assessment Program (BSAP) exit examination and graduate from high school. Robbie appeared to find the clarity of the objectives motivating, believed he was making progress, and was optimistic about his writing potential. He liked hearing the teacher's feedback, and cited several teacher-prescribed strategies he found useful.

Less Motivated Writers

Although most of our students made an effort to comply with their teachers' requirements that they complete assigned writing, some were clearly less motivated writers than those described above. All but one of these less motivated writers were also in a lower achievement group, and most described only performance goals and their teachers' standards. As in the group above, different patterns were present. Joan and Sam were both low achieving students who held performance goals and who told us they did not like to write. Both had been at least moderately motivated writers when we interviewed them in 5th and 6th grades; now they did not have an interest in doing well on their writing assignments, did no writing outside of school and did not expect to use writing in their future occupations. Neither described strategies they used in writing. Sam, who was in a lower level class than Joan, told us dejectedly that his scores on BSAP practice papers were not passing and described his response to school writing in this way: "I can make myself do it. I'd rather not." When asked what advice he would give others, Sam was unique in giving an affective strategy for dealing with failure: "Try to do your best...don't let other people discourage you or anything...just block out everybody else and do your thing."

In contrast, Ron and Veronique, also less motivated and low achieving students who held performance goals, had not given up entirely on improving their writing. Ron described a former teacher who cared about him as a developing writer and fostered mastery goals, in contrast to his present teacher who was more interested in surface features of finished products ("I turn it in and then she tell me I've got mistakes on it and stuff...I don't think she really care about the writing, she just care about the grades"). The mastery orientation fostered by the earlier teacher had been replaced by error-oriented performance goals, and his motivation had also declined ("this year I'm not too much into writing.."), but he still writes for his own enjoyment, plans to write when he is in college, and advises students that in order to learn how to write "if you've got a good teacher...listen to that teacher and let her teach you how to write." Veronique, who was assigned to the same basic level class as Robbie, complained that the class was too easy for her and that her writing ability had been diminished by assignments that focus only on achieving BSAP objectives. Her achievement in writing was also curtailed by a number of "distractions" she described: her boyfriend, the death of a fellow student, her involvement in a school group concerned about

issues affecting black students. Nevertheless, she continued to write outside of school, and to read voraciously. Paul and Siva, also low achieving and performance oriented students, differed from the other students we interviewed in their extreme passivity. Siva was taciturn, while Paul was unique among our high school students in that, when asked to give evaluative criteria, he frequently repeated portions of text rather than explaining the basis for his evaluations.

Karim, our final less motivated student was in general a high achieving student. An anomaly as our only exclusively mastery-oriented subject, he refused to do assignments he found unappealing, even to the extent of failing 8th grade English. As he stated, "If they give me something to write about and I don't like it, I don't do it". His uniquely independent stance was evident when, asked to decide which of two texts was better, he asked "for what purpose?", and in his description of a teacher who had "the wrong idea about writing" in her insistence on a formalized prose style.

Issues On Differentiating Motivated and Unmotivated Writers

Several issues emerged in our analysis of the relationship between goal orientation and writing motivation in this group of students. We found it more difficult than we had expected to clearly differentiate between "motivated" and "unmotivated" writers. Some students' high motivation and self-confidence was dampened by self-criticism and performance concerns. For others, it was difficult to tell if they were motivated to write or were merely compliant students. Still other students described themselves as disinterested in school writing but avid writers of letters or personal journals. The context for writing must be considered when motivation is assessed.

We also found that "performance" and "mastery" goals were not always readily distinguished, and that most students did not hold one kind of goal exclusively. Although performance goals were for most students an inescapable aspect of writing, this did not usually involve the competition described in goal theory. Moreover, it appeared that our students' motivation was related more to whether the source of their standards was internal or external than to their performance versus mastery orientation. Less motivated students were more likely to use external standards (usually their teacher's) to assess their attainment of performance goals. Performance goals driven by a student's own personal standards were not associated with low motivation. In some cases, students had adopted the teacher's (or BSAP scorer's) criteria as their own, and these were expressed as personal standards. In other cases, teachers had performance standards which were different from those held by the students, who believed their own mastery (and/or performance) standards to be better, and complained about their teachers' criteria.

As we analyzed the interview transcripts and further considered the role of the school's and teacher's influence on our students' goals, the prominence of the impact of state-mandated basic skills testing was evident. Almost all of our lower achieving students (every student in the lowest level class, which focused upon BSAP objectives) spontaneously mentioned the BSAP writing test or objectives. Interestingly, this external performance goal

did not affect all students' motivation in the same way; some found it discouraging, while others found the opportunity to see progress in the attainment of specific objectives to be motivating. Still other students took the BSAP objectives as their own, and adopted them as motivating personal performance criteria. It was not only the low achievers for whom external mandates for writing achievement were a factor; high achievers mentioned that they would be soon practicing for Advanced Placement tests they hoped to pass.

Finally, developmental aspects of these middle adolescent students must be considered in understanding their writing motivation. Developmental themes can be seen in Karim's resistance to authority, George's focus on impression-management, Ward's acute self-consciousness, Sam's struggle for self-esteem, Teara's self-display, and Veronique's social and ideological concerns. The development of all individuals occurs in a social context of which school (and school writing) is a part; for adolescents, the development of an identity and sure sense of self in the larger world influences every aspect of behavior.

Conclusions/Interpretation/Importance

Our data suggests that although goal orientation as a theory of achievement motivation does help us understand writing motivation, research that merely contrasts mastery goals and performance goals does not capture the complex motivational processes related to the writing motivation of adolescents. Our findings confirm the insights provided by Maehr (1989), who questions whether performance goals are all bad, and mastery goals all good. He suggests that we look at students' cognitive goal schemas and at the interactive nature of various goals. This is consistent with view of goal orientation which suggest that multiple goals - social and academic, intrinsic and extrinsic, performance and mastery, specific and general - may be present at the same time (Wentzel, 1991), and that it may not be necessary for students to choose between them. Our work supports her suggestion that it is the complex interactive pattern of goals students hold and behaviors they enact that determines achievement outcomes.

An aspect of student life we saw in our study which we cannot ignore is the influence of the school's assessment of a student's writing ability on the instructional level to which he or she is assigned. Such placement determines the students' instructional program, the kinds of goals it presents and the criteria for goal accomplishment, and it strongly influences the motivation of students to write. With few exceptions, our higher achieving students were more motivated. It seemed to us they had been in classrooms that supported mastery goals and gave greater opportunities for autonomy and self-expression.

Our research suggests it would be especially important to identify distinctive types of performance goals in writing, perhaps as they are related to various conceptions of audience. MacLean (1983) observes that student writers must develop and attend to the helpful "internal audience" rather than to the "imagined external audience", whose voice can inhibit writing. We agree. While some self-assured students were motivated to be performers and others did not let performance concerns impede their motivation, most

reflective students were made anxious and distracted by imagined responses to performance, irrespective of whether they envisioned adulation or disgrace. Our findings support the instructional suggestions of Cleary (1991), who cites the need for teachers and students to mutually establish writing goals and the criteria by which their attainment will be evaluated. This is needed in order to support the development of personal standards for mastery and performance goals and produce motivated writers.

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